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RUEHWN/AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN PRIORITY 1893
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 0588
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RUEHPO/AMEMBASSY PARAMARIBO PRIORITY 0980
RUEHPU/AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE PRIORITY 4215
RUEHSP/AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN PRIORITY 1645
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAAIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCPDOC/USDOC WASHDC PRIORITY 1499
RUCOWCV/CUSTOMS CARIBBEAN ATTACHE MIAMI FL PRIORITY
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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN ELECTIONS #8: ELECTION OUTLOOK -
BALANCED, MILDLY OPTIMISTIC

¶1. (U) This is the 8th cable in a series reporting on the Dominican Republic's May 16 congressional and municipal elections:

Election Outlook - Balanced, Mildly Optimistic

As Dominicans approach the May 16 congressional and municipal elections, the latest poll shows their voting intentions to be evenly divided between the government party and the opposition alliance. Remarkably, after years of reduced purchasing power for most Dominicans, they remain about as supportive of President Fernandez as when they elected him in 2004. Most also have confidence in the electoral authorities, despite accusations of political bias among the judges.

A Dead Heat Overall

A Gallup poll, conducted April 7-11 and published in reputable center-left daily "Hoy" in late April, shows Dominican adults' voting intentions to be statistically tied between the ruling PLD and its allies (41.7%) and the PRD-PRSC opposition alliance (41.4%), with an error margin of 2.8%. Although opposition leaders questioned the poll's accuracy, their unprecedented coalition of two historic adversaries -- both parties weakened by their 2004 election defeat -- may be working.

Other results suggest that the main opposition parties overall will not suffer heavy

defections by members who disagree with the alliance their leaders have engineered. As of the polling dates, the small percentage of defectors from the government's Bloque Progresista would have been about the same as from the opposition's Gran Alianza Nacional.

The poll also suggests the parties might get different results in Congress and the municipalities. More respondents believed that elected opposition mayors and city council members will outnumber those from the ruling coalition -- a finding corroborated by another survey measuring the popularity of mayoral candidates. The opposition currently controls most city halls; conventional wisdom holds that the opposition has stronger local leadership outside the big cities.

Opinion was evenly divided on which side would gain more seats in each house of Congress, but slightly more respondents believed the government would gain strength in the Senate (where the PLD presently holds only 1 of 32 seats). Again, this is consistent with other poll results. Congressional elections depend heavily on provincial and local leadership, but the ruling party has some attractive senatorial candidates -- such as Attorney General Francisco DomInguez Brito in Santiago, the second city -- and seems likely to bolster its senatorial bloc.

Whatever the election's oucome, it is unlikely to cause any significant shift in the Dominican Government's policies or orientation. Another poll, conducted in December by a university think tank, attempted to measure the general public's ideological preferences on the eve of the campaign. Among the respondents, age 15 and up, 41% overall picked "on the right" as best describing their politics; only 7 percent chose "on the left"; 18% were "in the center"; and 34% did not know or respond. The think tank's director commented that the major parties, regardless of their history or rhetoric, in practice represent gradations from moderate to conservative, without dramatic differences. Pragmatically, their words and deeds are calculated to attract voters.

Mood Swings

The voting public also appears somewhat more optimistic in general than two years ago, when they voted overwhelmingly to oust incumbent President Mejia. The country is headed in the right direction, according to 52% of respondents, and 51% said the economy would improve within two years. But 45% saw their personal economic situation as bad or very bad; only 16% considered their circumstances to be good or very good. Excellent overall economic growth since 2005 has had minimal resonance in public opinion, except a recognition that the economy has stabilized under Fernndez.

Mid-term election results to some extent are viewed as a referendum on the incumbent president. In that regard, Leonel Fernandez is sitting pretty. To a question whether he should run for reelection in 2008, 55% responded yes. This approval was even higher in the big cities, 63%. Some 49% viewed Fernandez's performance in office as good or very good, and 54% were satisfied with his administration. In stark contrast, 80% disagreed with the

idea that the country should amend its constitution to allow former president Meja to seek another term in 2008. Even 65% of Meja's own party, the PRD, opposed his running again.

Mid-term public opinion can change, however. In the last congressional and municipal elections, in 2002, President Meja's popularity during his first two years in office helped elect an overwhelming majority of PRD senators and mayors and a large plurality of PRD representatives. But Meja's popularity collapsed in the ensuing two years, amid a national financial crisis and revelations of corruption; his no-holds-barred reelection campaign did not avert defeat.

The Central Electoral Board

PLD leaders, especially presidential chief of staff Danilo Medina, have repeatedly expressed distrust of the Central Election Board (JCE), which will conduct the elections

and adjudicate any disputes over the results, on grounds that most of the JCE judges are affiliated with the opposition. As a check on the JCE, Medina has called for reactivation of a civil society monitoring committee led by veteran political mediator Msgr. Agripino Nez. Predictably, the opposition argues there is no need. Most voters apparently do not share the PLD concern: 71% responded that the JCE is doing a good or very good job of organizing the elections; only 12% said they were dissatisfied.

Issues of Concern

Which is not to say that the voters have no concerns. Respondents picked as the country's main problem, in descending order of percentages: electric power blackouts, the crime wave and gang activities, unemployment, potable water shortages, illegal drug trafficking and consumption, and deficiencies of the educational system. On a related question, the greatest number of respondents singled out the health sector as most in need of public investment.

More than half of respondents believed the government was using public resources to support its parties' candidates in the election. Half said that in the Fernández administration there has been just as much corruption as under Meja, or even more.

¶2. (U) Drafted by Bainbridge Cowell.

¶3. (U) This piece and others in our series can be consulted at our SIPRNET web site (<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo>) along with extensive other material.

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